

HOMEPAGE

Rival I-395 plans would bring iconic bridges, parks, sunlight to downtown and Overtown

By Andres Viglucci

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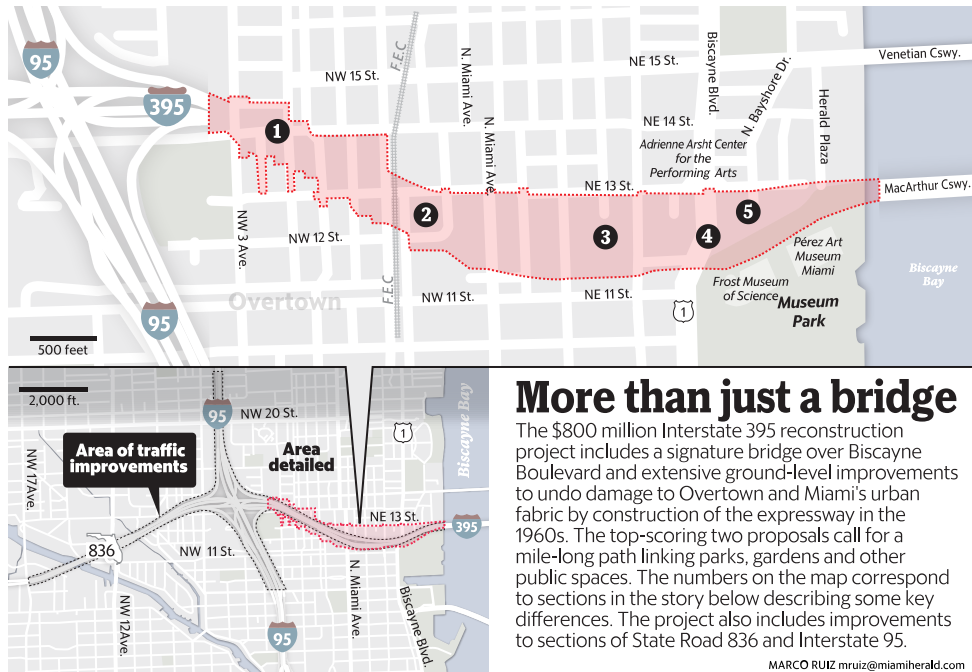
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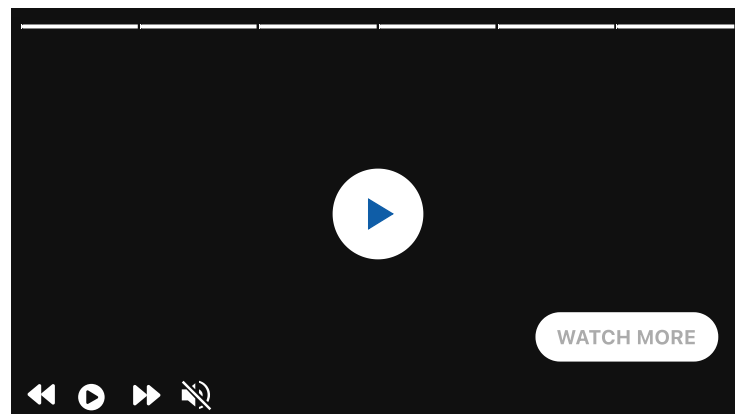
A view of the new Interstate 395 expressway and signature bridge with park space below in the proposal by the Archer Western-The de Moya Group.
ARCHER WESTERN-THE DE MOYA GROUP

After a decade of planning and debate, the competition to build a bridge that would define downtown Miami came down to two starkly different designs: One, [controversially declared the winner](#) by a mere half point, is a six-arched suspension structure meant to recall a spouting fountain over Biscayne Boulevard.

The other, the clear favorite of a committee of four community representatives charged with scoring plans on aesthetic grounds, is a pair of support pylons resembling dancers in a *pas de deux* at the door to the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.



TOP VIDEOS



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But the so-called signature bridge — the focus of [a still-roiling dispute](#) over state transportation officials' handling of the selection of a contractor to rebuild Interstate 395 — is only the most salient element in an unusually ambitious \$800 million

expressway project that aims no less than to radically remake a critical stretch of downtown Miami.

As it takes down and replaces the obsolescent, mile-and-a-half-long I-395, the Florida Department of Transportation, responding to years of pushing and litigation by local residents and elected officials, will also attempt to remedy the damage done to the historic black community of Overtown and Miami's urban fabric when the expressway cut its destructive path through the area in the 1960s.

A key piece of the project — extensive improvements at ground level — would transform what's now a blighted, disconnected no-man's land of oppressively low overpasses and closely spaced columns beneath I-395 into a series of sunsplashed parks, gardens and public spaces linked by a mile-long pathway between Overtown and Biscayne Bay. All of that would be made possible by raising the new expressway farther off the ground and drastically reducing the number of support piers, allowing sunlight to shine through for the first time in 50 years.

At about 55 acres, the stretch of land under and around the new I-395 would be the largest urban park in the city of Miami, notes Juan Mullerat, a Miami planner and architect on the team selected by FDOT for the expressway project, a joint venture led by contractors Archer Western of Chicago and Miami's The de Moya Group.

A review of the [elaborately detailed proposals](#) by the two top teams, who easily outdistanced the third-place finisher in overall scoring, shows they followed similar broad strategies, in line with minimum parameters set by FDOT. But their plans, developed after dozens of meetings with local residents and stakeholders, also have some key differences.

Whether the Archer Western team's vision is ultimately the one that gets built, though, is still uncertain. Some elected officials and stakeholders [contend FDOT flubbed or gamed the scoring](#) of competing proposals, effectively overriding the votes of an aesthetic-review committee that included Miami-Dade Commissioner Audrey Edmondson and Arsht president John Richard.

Both the Miami-Dade Commission and the county Transportation Planning Organization have demanded a public vetting of the plans before FDOT, which withheld the proposals from public view until after the selection had been made, awards the contract. The second-ranked team, a consortium led by international contractors Fluor and Astaldi and Miami-based MCM, has meanwhile filed a formal bid protest.

COMMON ELEMENTS

Both teams' proposals call for an elaborate, continuous themed trail for people on foot and bikes. Each would install a pedestrian bridge spanning the Florida East Coast rail tracks and extensive landscaping throughout, principally reliant on native species. The trails would link dog parks, open-air performance spaces, splash fountains and community gardens. There would be sculptures and other public art.

Overhead, the expressway would be split into two elevated spans, one going east and the other west, both situated slightly north of the present roadway alignment. Support columns would be reduced from the 440 now existing to no more than 107 under the FDOT baseline, though each of the two proposals shrinks the number

somewhat below that. Sophisticated lighting schemes would ensure both safety and curb appeal after dark along the full length of the trails.

SOME KEY DIFFERENCES

Archer Western plans to double-deck State Road 836 starting west of the Miami River and over I-95 to the rebuilt 395 — an addition its engineers contend will eliminate traffic backups on the new expressway and allow them to finish the project in four years, a year ahead of FDOT's five-year deadline and its competitors' schedules. The speedier schedule is possible because most of that viaduct construction would take place outside of existing lanes of traffic, which also reduces the impact on expressway users, said Robert Linares, an engineer on the team.

The viaduct approach would also allow for a far greater elevation at the west end (No. 1 on the map) of the 836 span as it enters Overtown, roughly at 60 feet versus 30 feet in Fluor's proposal. The higher elevation would provide more light and openness and allow the planting of tall canopy trees, Archer Western's designers say, though their roadway blueprint gradually tapers down to a similar height as its chief competitor's as it moves east. The team's plan calls for an urban market area and an interactive fountain, among other features, under the tall span.

Fluor-Astaldi manages what might be a coup on the east end of the expressway (No. 5 on the map) Its plan provides for a new 3-acre park to connect Museum Park and its Metromover station to the Arsht, long a goal of planners.

That's made possible by extending its cable-suspended signature bridge toward the east, eliminating a massive, existing support embankment and moving a roadway that now connects northbound Biscayne Boulevard to the MacArthur Causeway to the north side of the new bridge, said the team's urban designer, Bernard Zyscovich. The park also allows direct access to the bay and a potential landing spot for a promised rail link to Miami Beach.

The Archer Western version also provides green space under the new bridge and a wider sidewalk on Biscayne Boulevard, but Museum Park remains fenced off, and there is no direct bay access.

SIGNATURE BRIDGES

Both (No. 4 on the map) are the work of noted bridge designers. Archer Western's is by [Donald MacDonald](#) of San Francisco, designer of the east span of the SF-Oakland Bay Bridge, and Fluor-Astaldi's by [Linda Figg](#) of Tallahassee, responsible for the Sunshine Skyway bridge in Tampa Bay and the Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys.

Archer Western's bridge is suspended from six precast concrete arches of varying heights that sprout from the ground between the expressway's two spans and soar over them. The tallest arch is 330 feet and the suspended spans are 936 feet long. The clearance over the boulevard averages out to 27 feet, according to the team. Programmable LEDs change colors and can be set into patterns of motion. The design is explicitly meant to recall a fountain, but numerous observers on social media have likened it to a spider — and some wags have altered renderings to insert a Godzilla battling the arachnid.

The team says the dynamic arches and their confluence at the center of the roadway will make the bridge an urban focal point that looks different from every angle. It won't be lost amid the verticality of the skyscrapers going up in the neighborhood, and will stand out so much they will be seen by airplanes plying the Miami International Airport routes that run almost directly overhead, they say.

Fluor-Astaldi's bridge is stayed by cables suspended from a pair of 350-foot-tall pylons that straddle each of the two spans, which clear Biscayne Boulevard by 24 feet. The suspended spans are 980 feet long.

Figg calls it a "functional bridge sculpture" designed to recall dancers with a raised arm. Some have noted a similarity to broken scissors. The tip of each is equipped with a light, and so are the dancers' "heads" — which contain translucent rotating rings that change colors. Programmable LEDs illuminate the pylons, cables. The underside of the span superstructure has rounded lights meant to resemble musical notes.

The team says the design of the superstructure undersides, which are beveled and streamlined, allow more light in and give them a lighter appearance. They also baffle the sound of traffic. All support piers are specially designed.

THEMES

Archer Western proposes a "Heritage Trail" celebrating Miami's Tequesta indigenous people and its African American, Latino and Caribbean communities through artwork, displays and designs. Columns would have colorful mosaics while paving patterns would be inspired by West African, Latin American and Caribbean art. Legacy and heritage walls that ramps would highlight figures from Overtown and Miami history.

Fluor-Astaldi proposes a "Conga Line" that plays off Overtown's rich musical history and the Arsht Center's role as a performing arts showcase. Paving would be an abstract keyboard pattern and landscaping in some spots would be shaped to recall musical notation. In Overtown, the paving will be inscribed with jazz instruments. At the entrance to the Arsht's Ziff opera and ballet hall, an arrangement of trees in a multi-use plaza echoes the musical notation for the theme of the Miami Sound Machine's "Rhythm is Gonna Get You."

CENTER SPANS

Fluor-Astaldi's expressway spans (No. 3 on the map) would separate widely, to a maximum of 130 feet, as they cross North Miami Avenue from the west towards the Arsht, before coming back close together past Biscayne Boulevard. Its designers say that approach opens up the sky and reduces the overhead structure's visual impact for people on the ground, while allowing an expansive green park space at its center. The opening also gives viewers on the ground a dramatic opening to look up at the dancing pylons, as if they were giant artworks in a sculpture garden, Figg said.

The separation also confers a construction advantage, Figg said. To allow traffic to continue flowing, FDOT plans to construct one new span, open it to traffic, then tear down part of the existing expressway to build the second new span. The separation means FDOT can build its new spans without touching the existing bridge. She said the FDOT baseline plan, which Archer Western follows, would require tearing down a part of the existing bridge during construction, creating a bottleneck.

The team also sought a clean, streamlined look for its roadway superstructure design, Figg said. The superstructure calls for a white concrete finish, and its underside is shaped or beveled for a lighter look. That acts to allow in more light and to contain expressway noise so that the ground level will be quiet, she said. All columns were custom-designed.

Archer Western keeps the roadway spans (No. 3 on the map) close together and extends the arches of its bridge along that stretch to act as a focal point — and a meeting point for park visitors. The team’s plan also places a large interactive fountain at the center of a broad plaza under the span. The team’s plan places green space along the edges of that stretch, including a “native forest” of hardwood trees.

Its plan also calls for a “sleek” overhead superstructure.

Both teams also include a tree-shaded, multi-use plaza at the entrance to the Arsht’s Ziff hall that can be used for events or valet parking, and leave space for a planned parking garage to serve the center.

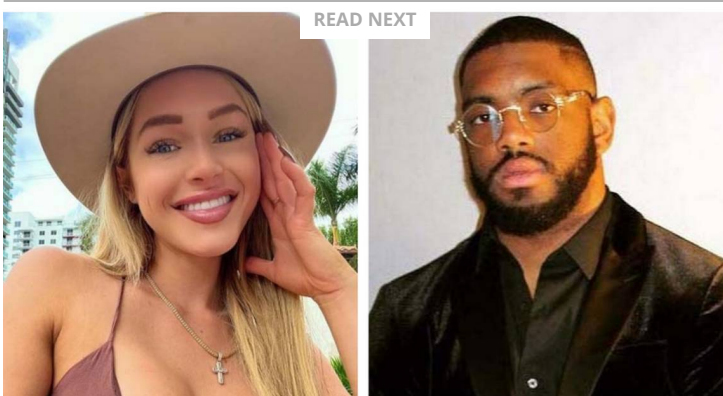
THE PLUG

The teams take different approaches to a massive support embankment, or plug, just west of North Miami Avenue (Number 2 on the map).

Archer Western’s plan removes its center to make room for its Heritage Trail. Remaining walls would display images of historic figures and events in Miami and Overtown history.

Fluor-Astaldi’s plan removes the plug entirely and turns the resulting two acres of open space into a “music chamber” with mini-stages around column bases.

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